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Black and White

Eddie Chambers

Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2000, 200pp, 123 b/w illus, pb, £14.95, 0 500 28135 1.

The Jamaican-based art historian and writer, Petrine Archer-Straw, has provided us with a fascinating study of a fascinating phenomenon from a fascinating period and place – 1920s Paris. The phenomenon itself came to be known as ‘Negrophilia’ – that is, a white love of black culture. Negrophilia was, according to this book, ‘the term used by the Parisian avant-garde in the 1920s to affirm their defiant [and we might add,

deviant] love of the negro as a provocative challenge to bourgeois values. This book explores the historical ambiguities and racial complexities of 1920s Paris and describes the short-lived craze that overtook the city when black culture became highly fashionable and a sign of being modern’.

Archer-Straw does much to order and make sense of what was a deeply flawed and contradictory cultural movement. In its wider context, the story of negrophilia spanned several continents, namely Africa, the Americas and Europe, though in many ways the book is a description of what happened at a particular moment in time when Africans and African-Americans came

together with white, supposedly liberal, Parisians in a heady yet confusing and doomed cultural and social mix.

A word about the historical background to negrophilia gives an indication of the complexities and contradictions of the movement. During the 19th Century, the French had been enthusiastic colonisers of Africa, not particularly known for any benevolence in their colonial adventures. Indeed, it had only been a couple of decades before ‘the jazz age’ that the Conference of Berlin had seen the major European powers divide Africa, the dark continent, into so-called European ‘spheres of influence’. Concerted and ordered exploitation lay at the heart of

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this dividing of the spoils. And yet, as Archer-Straw demonstrates, 'unlike that of their British neighbours, French interest in their colonized peoples went beyond economic considerations'. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the world, the preceding centuries had seen the creation, within the US, of the Negro, the black American, the African-American. That is, the person of African heritage removed from Africa, becoming instead (and fighting to become) an American citizen. This notion of citizenship was evidenced by a striving for political, educational, economic and social progress and parity. Men of letters such as WEB du Bois and poets such as Langston Hughes regarded themselves, and other black people, as having a rightful place within the modern American metropolis. The early 20th Century was after all a period that saw massive migration of black American people from a largely rural, agricultural South to a modern, urban, industrialised North. Modernity, with all its sophistication, for both negro America and white America, was the order of the day.

One of negrophilia's greatest failings was that it was unable to be of any tangible political benefit to Africans within France's colonial territories. Furthermore negrophilia was unwilling or unable to distinguish between the so-called uncivilised or primitive African of Tarzan fiction, the heathen for whom the jungle (with all that the word implied) was a natural habitat and the proud, accomplished, often educated thoroughly modern and sophisticated black Americans who made Paris their home during the decade in question. As far as the negrophiles were concerned, these Americans embodied a higher state of being because their black skins put them closer to nature and gave them an enviable sense of style, vitality, rhythm and, dare I use the word, soul. What Archer-Straw does is guide us through this often contradictory and sordid quagmire, by sensitively yet perceptively examining and critiquing the many negrophiliac images and texts from the era. In her words 'a reading of what such images and texts communicated to their audiences requires an understanding of a complex semiology of signs and symbols whereby every mark has a history of silent meaning'. This is both the book's purpose and Archer-Straw's achievement.

We learn why it was that Paris, and not

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centre for negrophilia: 'the French capital had long been a haven for émigrés ... offering tolerance and even appreciation of cultural diversity'. We learn, too, some of the reasons why so many black Americans, such as the dancer Josephine Baker, made such a seemingly Faustian pact with the Parisian elite. Reading this book is a rather dispiriting experience, as time and time again we get the distinct impression that black Americans in Paris, in terms of their studious objectification as the embodiment of primitive chic, were always getting the fuzzy end of the lollipop. Perhaps we had better regard the perversities of negrophilia as being the lesser of two evils. After all, many black Americans were in Paris to escape the race riots, lynchings, economic servitude and segregation that had rapidly taken hold of post-slavery America, excesses that the arrival of the 20th Century had done nothing to diminish or alleviate. Archer-Straw again: 'Accessibility to whites and their lifestyles gave them [blacks] a sense of power, albeit a limited one. Life in Paris afforded them freedoms and excesses rarely experienced by blacks in America: they believed themselves equal.'

At the core of negrophilia lay liberal Paris's obsession with the rhythm of the jungle that black people were considered to possess. It was a rhythmic sensibility that was regarded as just the job for dealing with the post WW1 uncertainty and self-doubt that characterised the leading nations of civilised Europe. After all, the self-proclaimed greatest nations of the world had just spent four years slaughtering each other's young men in unprecedented and horrific numbers. For those black people not deemed to look, dress or dance primitively enough, coaching and more suitable attire was often provided. But this was always a faux primitivism that spoke loudly of white people's attitudes towards Africans, much more than it did of the physiological or cultural make-up of Africans and new world Africans themselves. Indeed, rather wearily,

and whites shared the same dance floor, but little else. Images of blacks and whites together in that era show them dancing, dancing and only dancing.'

The book (monochrome illustrations only) costs a hefty £15, which seems quite overpriced. It is however extensively illustrated, with something like 123 illustrations, many of them invaluable in aiding our understanding of Archer-Straw's dissection of her subject matter. This book should appeal to many different types of readers. Archer-Straw's narrative is after all a grand, compelling and, above all, comprehensive one. For example, we learn much of the inspiration and working practices of the early 20th Century European masters such as Man Ray, Léger, Picasso and company.

We also learn much about major figures of the era such as the previously mentioned Josephine Baker and the major negrophile of the period, the shipping heiress and socialite Nancy Cunard. One of the most fascinating chapters in the book is the one that deals with Cunard's tenacious though skewed attempts to bring into existence an anthology of contemporary black existence, *Negro*. Archer-Straw recounts Cunard's visit to Jamaica and her boast of meeting 'not one white person' 'during her whole stay'. An apparently bemused Archer-Straw writes 'why Cunard chose to play down her introduction to white Jamaican society one can only speculate'. I'd have thought Cunard's reasoning was obvious. White Jamaicans, as a social and economic group, were not dissimilar to the whites of South Africa, in relation to the darker majorities that surrounded them. It is intriguing, baffling even, to consider what possible benefit this motley crew could have been to Cunard and why it is she should have openly declared any contact she might have had with them. ■

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